

The Advocate

Grandparents Can Get Help for Grandchildren

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Iceola Moore is raising her three grandchildren, ages 12, 11 and 7. Moore does not have custody of the children, but she said she cares for them because of her daughter's substance-abuse problems.

"It's all right with me, and I'm glad to take them in," Moore said. "I'm going to continue to raise them as long as I have breath."

Moore has to rely on her disability and Social Security checks to pay for food, clothes and school supplies. Sometimes Moore forgoes some of her prescription medication to cover her grandchildren's expenses.

"I hate to see them want things, and I can't get them," she said. "I'd like to get a computer for them."

Moore is among a growing number of grandparents raising grandchildren, picking up the slack for their own children. The grandparents have to make tough decisions about education, finances, medical care, safety -- and custody.

The 2000 Census shows that nearly 5.8 million grandparents in America live with a grandchild. Of those people, 42 percent, or about 2.4 million grandparents are responsible for their grandchildren's care.

Circumstances precipitating grandparent care giving include parental abandonment, substance abuse, teenage pregnancy, break-up, incarceration, mental health problems and death, said Dorothy Jackson, managing attorney of the Elder Law Clinic at Southern University.

The Elder Law Clinic, which opened in 1998, includes legal services for economically disadvantaged residents who would otherwise be unable to afford legal counseling.

In many cases, Jackson said, grandparents also have to make legal choices made in the best interest of their grandchildren.

Jackson frequently visits support groups for grandparents caring for their grandchildren. Many grandparents run into custody battles with their own children. Some won't cooperate.

"It's vital to obtain legal guardianship or custody, or you'll be forever limited. You'll have trouble getting them to school or to the doctor," Jackson said.

For grandparents to gain custody, they must prove the parents are unfit or that they are abusing the child. Parents can also sign over provisional custody for a year without going through court proceedings.

Having physical or legal custody of their grandchildren also entitles grandparents to receive child support from the parents.

Even if the parents are resistant, Jackson said, grandparents must stand up and ponder some serious questions.

"Is it worth taking the risk that I'm going to lose the relationship with my daughter or son if I take these kids to court or will I lose my grandchildren if I don't?" Jackson said. "It's a hard road to go, but we have to make those decisions no matter what."

Put the best interest of the children first and remind the parent that, "I was here for you, and now I'm here for them," Jackson said. "I'm asking you to do what's right morally and legally to do what's best for the kids."

Support groups, such as the Head Start Grandparent Support Group, help grandparents cope with the many challenges of raising grandchildren, said Rose Doolittle, a volunteer facilitator for the support group.

J.B. White is a member of the group.

Although White's daughter lives with him, he provides most of the care for his two young grandchildren.

White makes doctors' appointments and spends most of his day caring for the children, ensuring that most, if not all of their needs are met.

White said he wouldn't have it any other way.

"It's been important for me to be in their lives," he said.